Medieval Architecture

The Middle Ages were dark times for Europe. When the barbarians destroyed Rome, they destroyed all their advancements in technology and lifestyle. Europe's architecture fell to levels not seen since the Bronze Age. However, as time progressed, Europeans began to rise from these dark times, and Europe became a hub of civilization. Probably, though, it was the amazing architectural advancements made in those times that defined this period most.

The Pre-Romanesque times were the beginning of this era. It was famous for its simple architecture. It started in the late 8th century, when the Merovingian Kingdom rose to power. It is characterized by its simple architecture. It involves small buildings with smooth, chiseled sides. In this architecture form, walls are massive to support the weight of the building. Openings and arches are common, but openings are often small. Barrel arches are common in Pre-Romanesque architecture.

The Pre-Romanesque period was also very notable for smaller details. The interior was often in basilican form. This meant that there would usually be a main corridor, with two others on either side. There would also be a large space at the end of the main corridor (or the *nave*), called the *apse.* There would also be columns inside to support the *clerestory*, a high part of the nave's walls. The clerestory used windows to allow more light in. Another, less common feature was the *transept*, which was a short corridor that cut across the nave. However, due to the lack of flying buttresses, no

Pre-Romanesque building can truly count as a real basilica.

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Pre-Romanesque buildings had a couple of branches. Likely the most notable one was the one called Carolingian architecture. This branch was surprisingly different from its origin. It involved several different architectural styles, such as Christian, Late Antique, and Byzantine. It was more detailed than most Pre-Romanesque buildings, and often had much more elaborate designs and artwork. Its most famous building is probably the Palatine Chapel, or Aachen Cathedral.

By the 10th century, a new architectural style emerged. This new style superseded Pre-Romanesque architecture by the 11th century. This new style was called Romanesque architecture. It was much more elaborate than its ancestor, and it was evidently much more popular. However, it still carried a

few traits. For example, it still used thick walls for support, limiting creativity in the design. It also kept the pillars used for support in Pre-Romanesque buildings, as well as keeping the basilican form.

However, this style was still very different. It used arcading, or decorative arches, inside the buildings. It also increased the use of round or semicircular arches. It did the same with vaults, or high ceilings, using semicircular barrel vaults in architecture. However, groin vaults were also used. These looked like four triangular sails put together like a puzzle, with a ridge down each side of each sail.

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Another well-known part of the style is the windows. A distinct feature of most buildings in the Romanesque style was the idea of taking two arched windows and putting them side by side, with a pillar separating them. This became known as an ocular window. In larger Romanesque buildings, you may find wheel-or-rose-shaped windows. However, many Romanesque

buildings are known for being large, so such windows are common.

In the 12th century, a new style emerged, called Gothic architecture. However, this was not invented by the Goths—the word Gothic had come to mean foreign or barbaric, because the Goths were a ‘barbarian’ tribe that had infamously sacked Rome. The Gothic style, despite having such a name, was extremely popular--and this fact was most likely because of the flying buttress.

The flying buttress was counted among the greatest architectural advancements ever made. It was an arch-like form that when put in place looked similar to ribs. They were used to distribute weight in Gothic buildings, allowing much thinner walls to be made. The flying buttress also allowed taller buildings to be made. These buildings were basically akin to

modern skyscrapers and put emphasis on vertical construction.

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However, Gothic architecture was not done yet. Ribbed vaults were put into use with this architectural style. Ribbed vaults were like groin vaults, except for the ridge or rib down the middle of each quarter of the vault. Fan vaults were also put into use. These were similar to groin vaults as well, except the columns holding it up fanned out into the structure. Gothic architecture changed the arches, too. It employed the pointed arch, which was used quite commonly, and was very popular. It also borrowed decorative arcading and the ocular window from Romanesque architecture.

Thanks to the flying buttress, thinner walls and taller buildings allowed creativity in art and design. Gothic structures became famous for their extreme details on the outside and inside—however, these details only appeared in structures in the middle of the Gothic period. Stained glass was used in increasing numbers, becoming more and more intricate. Small patterns were used on the outside of the building. Some popular ones were repeated arches and small knobs. The basilican form disappeared with the thick walls. A good example of this is Milan cathedral in Italy. Another example is Westminster Abbey in London, England. In both, you can see

everything mentioned here, including the presence of the flying buttress.

Even though these three styles were extremely popular, they were not the only ones in their time. In fact, a number of different styles coexisted along with these three giants. I can give only a brief introduction, however, for it would take years to understand all these styles in full.

The Norman style was a particularly popular one. It appeared soon after the Romanesque style fell out of favor. One of the main types of buildings that used this style were castles, and fittingly: the Normans were, after all, amazing military architects. Even the buildings that weren't used in war were well built for battle! However, something else you must know about Normans is that they integrated many cultures into their own. This meant that their buildings included Byzantine frescoes, Muslim arches, and several Romanesque aspects.

Byzantine architecture was a style in its own league. It was mainly used in one empire, the Byzantine Empire, but used exclusively there. It appeared very early, after AD 330, and lasted until the 1600s. However, it did not fall with the Empire, for it had spread throughout the Christian east, notably the Russian Empire. It employed the use of large windows and domes in most of its buildings, allowing light to flood in. The Byzantine

architects who employed this style were known for eclecticism and borrowed aspects of other styles to create totally unique buildings.

The architecture of medieval times was beautiful and stunning, from start to finish, from beginning to end. However, they have completely disappeared, leaving architecture forever—right? It is not so. In fact, most buildings taller than two stories use elements incorporated from medieval architecture.

Modern buildings incorporate many aspects of Gothic architecture specifically. For example, medieval architects pioneered the use of local, sustainable materials. Many modern architects also use this method, making buildings out of locally sourced materials, like wood, stone, and metal. Security measures pioneered in medieval times are also employed, namely encircling walls. As well as this, Gothic design is often used in contemporary architecture, namely the geometric textures, or patterns, on Gothic buildings. Modern architects also incorporate large windows and huge, empty spaces in buildings to give a sense of open air, as Gothic buildings did.

However, even the original design has not disappeared. Several buildings have been built after their style’s period, and some buildings have been finished, even going into the 1900s! Gothic architecture has been the most used. In fact, this new fad even has a name: Gothic and Romanesque Revival. It is a small edit of the original design, and very interesting. Examples include Trinity Church, in Boston, Massachusetts, a beautiful example of Romanesque Revival with its large size and rounded arches. Another great example is St. Paul’s on the Green, in Norwalk, Connecticut,

with its stunning façade and lovely ocular windows. Both were built in the

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From the Pre-Romanesque period in the 8th to 11th centuries, to Romanesque times in the 10th to 13th centuries, and finally Gothic architecture in the 12th to 16th centuries, with everything in between, I have covered an extraordinary amount in five pages. However, all this amounts to less than half of architectural history. In fact, the Renaissance was abundant in architecture. But that is a story for another time.

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